

Small Group Study

IS IT OK TO HAVE DOUBTS???

Small Group #1 Intro¹

No matter your spiritual background, questions about faith are normal. Even life-long followers of Jesus may struggle with doubts. But there's good news: contrary to popular belief, God is not angry at us for having questions! Instead of running from our questions, or hiding them, we want to be a community that brings our honest questions to Jesus. He loves us and wants us to get to know him so we can build trust and have fewer doubts.

Opening Question: What feelings or thoughts come to mind when you think about the word *doubts*?

Read and Discuss – John 20

19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

21 Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." 22 And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

24 Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." 26 A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." 28 Thomas

¹ Small Group Leaders: see leader notes at the bottom.

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said to him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:19-29 NIV)

1. Why do you think Thomas was so resistant to his friends' reports of Jesus' resurrection?
2. Why do you think Jesus literally and figuratively allows Thomas to poke him? What does this say about Jesus?
3. Thomas was honest with his community about his skepticism rather than internalizing it. Why is this important? What might have been different if he kept it to himself?
4. Thomas seems to go from regarding Jesus as a great teacher, to Jesus as God. What difference do you think that may have made in his life? What difference might it make in yours?

LIVING IT OUT

Despite following Jesus for many years, witnessing many miracles, and hearing many powerful teachings, Thomas still did not believe Jesus was God. Instead of answering Thomas' doubts with anger or condemnation, Jesus reveals himself, offers him peace, and challenges Thomas to stop sitting on the fence of faith.

Share with someone in the small group any ways in which you resonate with Thomas. What are your doubts or questions? What might be holding you back from going deeper with Jesus?

Stretch

Invite someone you know with questions to next week's study on "Does God do miracles?"

Prayer for the Week: *Prayer of Hope*

This week, try a Prayer of Hope: "God, you know the questions and the doubts I'm carrying. I want to believe that you care about them, even though it's scary. Help me to approach this Bible study series with an open mind. Please give me your peace."

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Do Miracles Exist Today?

Small Group #2 Intro

Last week we looked at Jesus' interactions with his disciples after his resurrection. One of the leaders of the early Christian church, Paul, makes a bold statement in a letter to new believers: "If Christ has not been raised from the dead, then our preaching is useless and so is your faith...[and] we are above all people to be pitied." (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). But Paul was right. At the center of Christianity is a miracle, and if miracles don't happen—especially that one—then we should all go home. Today we dive into this crucial topic.

Opening Question: Do you feel you've ever experienced something miraculous—even if it was only miraculous to you? If not, what would you need to experience to believe that miracles are real?

Read and Discuss

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. 25 Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. 26 She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. 27 She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, 28 for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." 29 Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. 30 Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" 31 And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?' " 32 He looked all around to see who had done it. 33 But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. 34 He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." (Mark 5:24-34, NIV)

1. Jesus comments that the woman has displayed faith. Where do we see this woman taking acts of faith? What do you admire about her?
2. In Jewish law, a menstruating woman was ceremonially unclean for 7 days and unable to go to the temple to worship, and anyone who came in contact with her would be made unclean.² What implications does this woman's sickness have for her social, mental, spiritual and physical health? What impact could the healing and Jesus' response have on her life?

² Leviticus 15:19

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3. The woman seems to seek Jesus out of desperation and risks a lot to put herself in a position to experience a miracle. In your own life, is there anything you want relief from as much as the woman? What would you be willing to do?

Living it Out

We can't force God to perform a miracle, but we can put ourselves in positions to see if God will keep his promises—much like the woman from our study.

This week, put yourself in a position for God to prove himself trustworthy. Ask God every day this week to show you he is trustworthy. Ask God for healing to a physical, mental, social or spiritual challenge you have that you would like Jesus to address. If you're comfortable, ask someone to pray with you.

Stretch

Pray for a miracle for someone else. You can check out this [training from the Vineyard Church](#) on praying for emotional and physical healing for guidance.

Prayer of the Week: *Prayer for Encounter*

"God, if you're real and good, would you get my attention in such a way that I'd know it was you? Show me that you are trustworthy with my whole life."

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If God is good, why is there suffering?

Small Group #3 Intro

Questions about suffering are connected to questions about God. What is God like? Is God trustworthy when things are miserable? Why is there so much pain, and what is God's role in it all? We wonder how a good God can claim to love this world and have the power to change things, and yet brokenness remains. Humans have pondered these questions for thousands of years. Today we get to explore a fascinating encounter where Jesus surprises his friends in their midst of their painful suffering.

Opening Question: When was a time in your personal life when something good came out of what seemed to be a bad situation?

READ AND DISCUSS

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) 3 So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." 4 When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, 7 and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

17 On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18 Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, 19 and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. 21 "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." 23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; 26 and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" 27 "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

32 When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in

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spirit and troubled. 34 "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. 35 Jesus wept. 36 Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" 38 Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. 39 "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." 40 Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" 41 So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." 43 When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." (John 11:1-7; 17-27; 32-44)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe how Mary and Martha respond similarly and differently in this passage.
2. Jesus waits to see about Lazarus even though he "loves him" and his family. We saw last week that Jesus can heal people. Why might Jesus wait instead of going as soon as possible?
3. Martha gives Jesus the "right" answer. How does Jesus respond? What might he be trying to teach her?
4. Why does Jesus weep with Mary if he knows he's going to raise Lazarus anyway? What might this show us about how Jesus engages with suffering?

LIVING IT OUT

Gospel Contemplation is a practice of engaging with Scripture where we imagine ourselves in the story and enter into the emotions, thoughts and questions of the passage and what that reveals about our posture towards Jesus. Listen to the above passage a few times audibly³.

- As you listen and imagine the story, what images, feelings, or memories come to mind?
- What insights or fears come to the surface as you meditate on the passage?
- What comfort do you experience from God as you consider your own hard moments when Jesus seemed to "show up late"?

STRETCH

³ Try the [YouVersion Bible App](#) or [Streetlights App](#)

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Follow Jesus' example and spend time with someone who is suffering. Don't try to fix them or give them advice. Be with them, and honor their suffering through your presence and friendship.

Prayer of the Week: *Prayer of Lament*

The book of Psalms is a prayer book for many occasions. There is even a prayer for when you are suffering— a prayer of lament. Read Psalm 42 and consider using it as a guide to write your own letter to God about an area of suffering or disappointment where you are still waiting to see some good come from it. Include your honest feelings - anger, hope, doubt, faith. If you have even a small hope that God can redeem suffering, end by writing "Even now, I believe you can..." Consider sharing this with someone from your small group.

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Do all religions point to the same God?

Small Group #4 Intro

A common assumption today is that the major religions of the world are basically the same. “Don’t they all preach a message of mercy, compassion, and love?” John wrote a biography of Jesus’ life and ministry in order to address this monumentally important question. We have named his biography the *Gospel of John*, and John’s stunning opening is below.

Opening Question: What do you think it means to be a Christian?

Background: Genesis 1

John begins to write his eye-witness account of Jesus’ ministry in a most unexpected place, all the way back to the beginning in Genesis 1. Let’s remind ourselves of how the Bible begins:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. 4 God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. (Genesis 1:1-4)

Read and Discuss

Now we jump into John’s Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

9 The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. 11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. 12 Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

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14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

18 No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. (John 1:1-5; 9-14; 18, NIV)

1. Why do you think John begins his biography of Jesus by reminding us of Genesis 1? What does John want us to know about how things started?
2. If all you knew about God and the Word/Son was what you read in this passage, what would you see about his goals, character, and values?
3. What is surprising about how John describes people and the way we become children of God? Does it seem too complicated?

LIVING IT OUT

Here is one dramatic way Christianity is different from all the other religions: God didn't just send a messenger or prophet to show us God's ways and values. God actually came himself in the person of Jesus. We call Jesus *Emmanuel*, or God-with-us. Let's live into this beautiful truth by continuing to read the Gospel of John.

Read a section of the book of John each day and ask:

- What do I learn about Jesus' goals, character and values in this passage?
- If people held these values and emulated Jesus' character, how would the world be different? How would I be different?

STRETCH

Interview someone who isn't a follower of Jesus and ask them, "If God were real, what would you want God to be like?" If you want to stretch more, you can follow up: "From your knowledge of the world, which religion most closely describes this God?" Share what you learned with the group next week.

Prayer of the Week: *Light into Darkness Prayer*

Jesus is the light of the world, "*and the darkness has not overcome it.*" (John 1:5)

An important life-long habit is praying Jesus' light into the areas of darkness we may encounter. This week pray this prayer: "Jesus, light of the world, we invite you into all the evil and injustices in our world, and into the darkness on campus. Shine in me and through me with your hope and power and love. Renew my joy and peace today."

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Does God Care About Me?

Leader Reminder: Print out the gospel summary and [response cards](#).

Small Group #5 Intro

Our love often comes with expectations, and relationships can feel transactional. Many of us wonder if a huge God can really notice me and my needs. Is following Jesus all about love, or is it a religion striving for power and trying to control us?

In this passage we see Jesus heading to Jerusalem where he will fulfill his mission on earth: to bring light into our dark world and ultimately be rejected and die for those he came to save. Jesus is headed to do the most important thing, yet first he takes time out of that mission to address the concerns of one marginalized stranger.

Opening Question: What's the most unconditional expression of love you've witnessed?

Read and Discuss

46 Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means "son of Timaeus"), was sitting by the roadside begging. 47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

48 Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

49 Jesus stopped and said, "Call him."

So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." 50 Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

51 "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him.

The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see."

52 "Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road. (Mark 10:46-52)

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1. The crowd and Jesus see Bartimaeus very differently. What does the crowd seem to care about? What does Jesus seem to care about?
2. The cloak was an outer garment that could keep you warm at night. Why might Bartimaeus cast it aside?
3. Although Bartimaeus is blind, he sees that Jesus is the *Son of David*⁴, in the royal line. He shouts out Jesus' true identity. Then he takes a big risk. After Jesus heals him and proves himself trustworthy, Bartimaeus takes the final step to follow Jesus. Where do you feel you might see yourself in this process?

Prayer for the Week: Prayer for Your Desires

Jesus invites us to explore his question, "What do you want me to do for you?" Ask Jesus for your deep desires, or ask him to reveal your hidden longings. Share with a friend.

Living It Out

There are many opportunities to say "yes" to Jesus throughout our lives. Today we consider the most fundamental "yes." This means accepting Jesus' love and healing, and following his leadership wherever it takes us, just like Bartimaeus did.

Take turns reading out loud the paragraphs below.



Followers of Jesus believe that God designed a beautiful world, and we all experienced **wholeness** in our bodies and minds. There was harmony in our relationship with God, others, and creation. But a seed of doubt entered our minds. "What if God **doesn't really care** about us? We think we could design a better life on our own."



Turns out we were wrong. The weight of trying to design perfect lives for ourselves is crushing. It leads to sickness, anxiety, and despair. Trying to design the best life for ourselves has led to our own **suffering** and the suffering of others. We live in a world of beauty and **suffering**.

⁴ David was a beloved king of Israel. The Old Testaments promised that the Messiah who was to restore Israel would come from David's lineage.

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God could have left us to **suffer** in the world we designed, but God cared enough to relocate. Jesus chose to enter our broken world. In the story, Jesus **cares enough** about this man's **suffering** to stop for him. This is because healing and restoring the world is Jesus' mission.



When Jesus died on the cross, he took on our selfishness and offers an end to our delusion and death.

In the biggest **miracle** of all time, he resurrected to live forever. He uses the power he demonstrated in the resurrection to begin restoring everything to wholeness and invites his followers to join him.

When we decide to let Jesus design our lives, we receive the Holy Spirit and are empowered to join him in his mission: to bring his **wholeness**, justice and love to our hurting world.

We have looked at stories from Jesus' life and tried out practices to build a relationship with him and see if he is trustworthy for the past five weeks. Jesus asks us "**What do you want me to do for you?**"

- If you are a Christian, is there an area of your life that you have kept from Jesus that you want to bring to him for healing and give to him to control?
- If you don't identify as a Christian. Do you want to spend more time getting to know who Jesus is and if he is someone you could trust with your life?
- Or are you ready to commit to following Jesus into the life of love, purpose and wholeness God designed for you?

Regardless of where you are, I want to give us a minute of silence to listen to God and consider how he may be inviting each of us to respond. [1 Minute of Silence]

SHARE

How is God is inviting you to respond? [Share as a group]

PRAYER

[one person reads this prayer out loud as the rest follow along silently with the prayer on the back of their contact card]

God, I pray you would help all of us continue to listen and respond to you. For those making

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the decision to let go of everything and make Jesus the ultimate priority in our lives, we pray: God, I believe Jesus is your Son. I believe he died on the cross for me and took away all the ways I have hurt my relationship with you, others and myself by rejecting your good design for life. I believe that you raised Jesus from the dead and that he is alive today. Forgive me for the wrongs that I have done and the ways I have neglected you. I accept the gift of your Holy Spirit, your love, forgiveness and leadership in every part of my life. Make me into the person you want me to be, now and forever. Amen.

FOLLOW UP

I'd like to follow up with each of you over the next couple of weeks to help you take the next steps. (Collect Response Cards. Prioritizing following up with those who made a decision to follow Jesus or continuing to explore first.)

LIVING IT OUT

Reflect on the things you've learned about God's character throughout this series. In what ways have your feelings or thoughts about Jesus changed? Take some time to write about this process and consider sharing with a friend.

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Leaders Prep: How to Use This Small Group Guide

Intro

Facing tough questions

This is a courageous Bible study series in which we address some difficult questions. We hope and pray that God will show up for people exploring faith in Jesus, and also help Christians grow in their faith and ability to engage these important questions.

Prepping the study:

Please spend time in the passage yourself each week before arriving. Studies are more engaging when the leader has prepared and been impacted by the passage themselves first. We have included questions that are targeted to answer the big question of the week, but feel free to add some on your own that feel helpful. It is always great to start a Bible study with, "What stood out to you in the passage and what questions do you have?"

Print out the passage for the week. Not everyone will bring a Bible, and having it printed out keeps people from being embarrassed.

Pray for guidance from the Holy Spirit as you lead, and pray for the people in your group by name.

In the final session there is an invitation to faith. Please print out the gospel summary for each person so they can follow along. Also print out [response cards](#).

Leading the study:

Tough questions can be intimidating and complicated. Bring to God any fears you have, and ask a mentor for help to prep.

We want to create a safe environment for people to express their real questions. We do not want anyone lecturing during small group nor making fun of the questions that people may have. Establish group norms in the first meeting that you can remind the group of each week. Here are a few examples:

1. This is a safe place for everyone's questions. Some of us have more Bible background than others. We will honor and make space for everyone's questions, even if they aren't ours.
2. We will strive to keep our responses short so we encourage everyone to participate.

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If someone talks too much during small group, gently remind them of the group norms. You may need to talk with them outside the group as well.

Each week there is a “Living It Out” and “Weekly Prayer” sections for people to do through the week. You may wish to send a reminder text to your group chat with the prayer prompt applications.

“What should I do when someone asks me a question I can’t answer?”

This small group series is all about questions. Sometimes we get nervous about our ability to answer our friends’ difficult questions. Just as we shouldn’t be afraid of our own questions, we also should not be afraid of other people’s questions. We do not need to have all the answers. We can trust Jesus will show up as he did for Thomas. Here are some steps to help that process.

1. Admit to the person you can’t answer it: *Great question. I have no idea.*
2. Commit to exploring the question together by doing research or finding someone with more experience with the question, and set a time to reconnect. *Let’s explore it together. I’ll do a little research. I’m excited to see how God uses this to grow my faith as well.*
3. If they are open, pray the prayer of hope above with them.